

A Theological Librarian's Thoughts on Bible Software[†]

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PRELIMINARY NOTE

I write as a theological librarian that has served in a seminary that emphasizes Greek and Hebrew exegesis. I have two masters degrees in biblical studies, and I am both a user and instructor when it comes to this kind of software. I cut my exegetical teeth in Bible college with BibleWorks, but I have experience with Logos and Accordance. Because I am primarily a PC user, I am more “comfortable” with PC software. I believe that Bible software is extremely useful, and I have done my best to assist students with selecting and making their purchase at the best price possible. This small essay is an attempt to help a user think through their purchase of Bible software, and it is neither an endorsement nor a review.

YANKEES OR RED SOX?

Anyone who starts asking questions about Bible software will soon learn that people have very strong opinions on which program to use. These opinions mimic the deepest rivalries—e.g., New York Yankees vs. Boston Red Sox. Different Bible software users will typically pick one and stick with it and will sometimes sneer at anyone who supports the “other” team. I’m not terribly loyal to either side. My team (BibleWorks) is no longer playing. I am a PC user and both companies run natively on PCs (though because of their history, Accordance is a Mac program that has

[†] “Bible software” refers to the main licensed software packages now on the market: Accordance Bible Software (<http://www.accordancebible.com>) and Logos Bible Software (<http://www.logos.com>). The author still mourns the demise of BibleWorks, and he will continue mourning until the resurrection (of either *BibleWorks* or the *Saints*).

been developed with a Windows version and Logos is a Windows program that has been developed with a Mac version). For some purists (you know who you are), the *possibility* of being defiled by a program crafted with the philosophy of “the other” operating system is enough to run to the Genius Bar and seek absolution. I honestly don’t care about operating systems. If it works for you, just use it.

To continue with the baseball analogy, I’ve heard Logos likened to the Yankees, given their size and marketing reach. That “reach” is matched only by the loyalty of their fans and perhaps the disdain of their detractors. (I’ve heard the term ‘evil empire’ applied to Bible software companies and baseball teams.) Some might say that Accordance is more akin to the Red Sox, but I’m not enough of a fan of baseball to competently stretch the analogy. Suffice it to say, some of the blistering critiques leveled by one “team” against another have more to do with team loyalty than objective comparisons.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DRIVE?

So, you don’t have a horse, and you want to get from point A to point B in a reasonable amount of time with the least amount of effort. You want a vehicle – something (typically) with four wheels and an engine with enough gas or a battery life to get you to your destination. Those vehicles take all sorts of shapes and sizes. A Volvo is a sensible car with good safety ratings and a stately European design. It’s great for city or highway driving, but you’d probably not want to live out of the back seat. On the other hand, you could get a Winnebago (a recreational vehicle), and that baby is going to be B-I-G. It will include everything (even the kitchen sink). It’s fine for highway driving, and you can live in it for months. Still, you’d likely never want to take it for a drive downtown, and wherever you go it’s going to require a lot of fossil fuel to get there.

The software packages are comparable. At their core, both provide biblical texts in searchable format along with a basic set of tools for interpreting the text. Accordance is fast. It’s lean. It’s mean. It’s meant to get you into the Greek and Hebrew with just the number of tools you’ll need for competent exegesis. It’s like the Volvo. Logos tends to be Winnebago-like. Logos base packages have more in them (including a lot of stuff that you won’t use), but there’s some really great stuff in there that makes it livable. Because of their deals with various publishers, Logos tends to be

able to include a lot. On the other hand, it's big and many feel it's clunky and slow in comparison to Accordance. (To tease out the analogy, BibleWorks could be compared to a tradesman's utility vehicle—*not very pretty, but loaded with tools.*)

This has implications for price. A new Volvo ain't cheap, and neither is a new Winnebago, but a Winnebago is certainly going to be *more expensive*. Keep in mind what you are buying. You're buying a vehicle *and* furniture, carpeting, a bathroom, and the kitchen sink! If you were to strip off all of the trappings of the Winnebago—just down to the wheels and chassis—you'd likely be paying a comparable price to the Volvo.

For both Accordance and Logos, you are purchasing the software *and* licensed content created by publishers. To mix in a new metaphor, Accordance tends to deliver publisher material *à la carte*. Buy what you need when you need it. Supplement your meal with a side order and a dessert. Logos tends to deliver an all-you can eat buffet smorgasbord. It includes more stuff at a lower price. (Just keep in mind that one typically has an extremely different dining experience at a fancy *à la carte* restaurant vs. a buffet serving food-grade packing material.)

All that to say: Do not base your purchase simply on price tag alone. Look closely at what you are getting in each package. If you were to compare two similarly priced packages in Logos and Accordance, you will find that the contents vary considerably.

While you consider the amount of “stuff” you’ll get, also consider the quality and type of stuff. Logos tends to throw in a great deal of material that is essentially “free”—*digitized versions of public domain texts*—often called “shovelware.” Because these texts are public domain, they don’t have to pay a publisher, so they can pass along the savings to the customer. But, public domain texts are typically older texts of varying quality. The texts included in Accordance packages are rarely public domain texts. So, Accordance is paying a publisher for each of those texts, and they tend to be more current.

Also, “more” is not necessarily better. You may get a lot of material in a Logos package, but even among the non-public domain “stuff,” you will find a lot of material that you may never use. That material is sitting on your hard drive taking up space – and slowing your search. The smaller selection provided in Accordance typically focuses on the base texts used

for exegesis – original language texts, translations, and the tools necessary to read the original language texts. If there's something you want in addition to these core texts you can add it later.

Note: Both companies provide packages that you can expand with other materials. Typically the best “deals” are found in purchasing packages, where you are essentially receiving a ‘bulk discount.’

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?

So, the next question is, “Where do you want to go?” Are you going to be driving in the city? Running errands for work? Are you going on vacation? Are you going to be a ‘digital nomad’ with no permanent residence?

Do you see where we’re headed? Do you plan to be a pastor? Do you plan to be a missionary? Do you plan to be a scholar? Do you plan to be a perpetual PhD student? Answering those questions will help you decide on what software to purchase.

If you are going to be moving around a lot, building a digital library can be handy. Every time you move your personal theological library, you will be tempted to curse the day you purchased paper copies of commentary sets, *HALOT*, *BDAG*, *TDOT*, and *TDNT*. Your aching back will be screaming, “What were you thinking? Haven’t you heard of a library card?” Obtaining works like these in Bible software can save your back.

So related to the question of “Where?” is the question, “*What do you want to be?*” If you plan to be a pastor, and you want to focus on building a well-rounded digital library of pastoral resources, exegetical tools, theological resources, etc., then Logos will typically provide a more generalist library. You can pick packages based on your particular faith tradition—or even based on whether you’re going into academia. If you are headed in the direction of historical or theological studies, you may want to invest in Logos, given their large library of historic and theological texts. It’s lovely to have Barth, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann all together and searchable.

On the other hand, if you are planning on going into Semitic studies and working with things like the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature, Targums, etc., you may want to concentrate on getting Accordance texts.

Accordance was doing work in Semitic languages very early in the history of Bible software, and many scholars working with Semitic texts adopted the program. So, Accordance tends to have the most robust works in that field. For instance, their Targum texts are grammatically tagged with more detail than the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon texts upon which Logos based their own version. On the other hand, the Old Testament Peshitta in Logos contains the Leiden apparatus. Accordance does not have this apparatus, but their Syriac text has full grammatical tagging. This is not to say that Accordance does not shine in other languages. (A Greek example: Accordance's Greek Old Testament Pseudepigrapha includes some manuscripts that are not present in the Logos Greek Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Plus, Accordance provides updated English translations of the Greek text—which can vary considerably from standard translations found in Charlesworth's *OTP* or Charles's *APOT*.) These are just a few examples of specialization. If you plan to pursue doctoral studies, track down scholars in your field and ask them what software they are using. Seriously, ask around.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO READ?

Consider this carefully. Are you a “book” person, or are you a “tablet” person? Do you prefer holding the spine in your hand and the experience of flipping pages? Do you love the smell of a bookstore or library? Would you rather get your fingers dirty with newsprint than read a blog? Would you rather have the text on a tablet, or on your cellphone? Are you a ‘techie’? Do you consider yourself a “digital native”?

Both Logos and Accordance have mobile apps for iOS and Android. So, I’m not highlighting portability, *per se*. Rather I’m bringing up the ‘reading experience.’ Some folks simply do not want to read from a screen for a prolonged period of time. Some people prefer the tactile experience of flipping pages. If you doubt you are ever going to read N. T. Wright’s Christian Origins and the Question of God series on your computer screen, then why would you purchase a digital copy? If you prefer paper, it may be best to go with Accordance, given that you will get fast, high-quality nuts-and-bolts texts that you can dip into as needed. Take a few ibuprofen, ignore your aching back, and spend your book budget on the hard copies. Those bookcases do look stately behind your Zoom presence.

What does it profit a man if he gains a whole library, but never reads it from his screen? Do you really want to invest thousands in a digital library that you will never read?

Now, some texts are simply ‘better’ (or at least more useful) in electronic format. I encourage everyone to purchase lexicons in digital format. Paired with the original text and reliable translations, you will use your lexicon far more often if you have it available on screen. There are other reference materials that may fall into this category—*those resources that require your attention for just a few paragraphs*—like encyclopedias, Bible dictionaries, or commentaries. Any resource that is heavy in cross-referencing and abbreviations (like a text critical apparatus) will also be helpful in a digital format (even if you *prefer* the ink). Just think about how many times you have to flip between the text, appendices and introduction when deciphering a “negative apparatus” like the text critical notes in the NA²⁸!

Side note: There are all sorts of interesting implications for having sacred texts on digital devices. Would you ever bind a *Qur'an* and a Bible together in the same cover? Would you ever interleave clippings from *The Inquirer* or some other salacious tabloid with the works of John Calvin? Oooo... How about mixing Nadia Bolz-Weber with John Piper? Our phones, tablets, and computers bring all sorts of “texts” together in one place. This is an extremely powerful feature of all things digital. I love being able to look up a word in BDAG on the fly; follow a rabbit trail from cross reference to the Apostolic Fathers, and then check in on Josephus, Philo, or some esoteric apocalyptic text without cracking a book cover. Still, ‘holy texts’ do not sanctify our screens. The convenience can come at a cost to our attention, affections, and perhaps even our sanctification.

Is it appropriate to hold your phone and open your Bible app to swear an oath? If that question gives you pause, it may be worth contemplating the implications of reading “the words of life” on silicon bricks.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR.

I’ve already addressed this a bit regarding public domain texts in Bible software. It is even more so true when it comes to free resources found online. If you are not paying for a text, pay close attention to whence and

when those texts came. In fact, pay close attention to where the texts originate in *Logos* and *Accordance* as well! For instance, the English translations of Josephus and Philo most readily available online and in Bible software are based on translations that are over a century old (Whiston-1732; Yonge-1855). So, it is best to consult a modern, more reliable translation. Keep in mind, when studying theology, history, or biblical studies, “old” is not necessarily of less value, but pay attention to the progression of scholarship. Biblical studies today is in a very different place from where it was in the 1930s – consider the profound impact of the Second World War or the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Books published prior to the public domain cut-off date will not take these events and discoveries into account (see Wikipedia on “[Public Domain](#)” for the ever-shifting cut-off date).

Also, pay attention to who is behind the ‘free’ resource. What is the agenda that drives the organization or individual to produce free texts?

Quality is an issue as well (especially with free resources). An example will suffice. As a librarian, I once helped a Greek professor produce a handout for a class that was translating through the Apostolic Fathers. This was before the Greek text was readily available in Bible software platforms, and the professor wanted the students to use a Greek text *without* a facing English translation (so neither the Loeb volumes nor Holmes’ edition would do). At the time, I was an active user of BibleWorks, and I had helped convert a Unicode Greek version of the Apostolic Fathers that was available online for free into an appropriate format. I then took that text and produced the handout for the professor. As the class worked through it, they found innumerable errors. It was not until later that I had found that the online text had been compiled by OCR with only a small amount of editing. My efforts were in vain.

WHICH KID IS YOUR FAVORITE?

So, the material above sums up answers I’ve given students when they’ve come asking about which Bible software to purchase. Often the student starts the conversation, asking: “What is your favorite Bible software?” or “What is the *best* Bible software?” I respond by asking if the student has any children. If they do, I ask, “Which child is your favorite?” or “Which kid is the best kid?”

An answer to those questions requires more than a simple one-word response. So, I've never been able to tell students, "*This* is the software to buy." In fact, I refuse to endorse any one software package (regardless of the various 'deals' that software companies offer to endorse their product exclusively). Rather, I try to give an honest answer about the software available and point students to the best "deals". Each company has its strengths. Each program has its quirks. Each user has his or her own approach to the texts. Each user has a different context for ministry. There is no right answer to "Which is the best?" or "What is your favorite?"

Making a choice is difficult. It is a toss-up that often depends mostly on your budget. Typically, folks pick one platform and stick with it. Some dabble in each over time, according to their need. Whatever choice you make, be sure to think about what you plan to do with the software and where you plan to do it. Think about portability and the experience of holding a paper book in your hand. Consider the implications of the Word of God written in pixels (implications to your eyesight and your sanctification). Spend time learning how to use the software so that you can use it responsibly and efficiently (both companies provide training online). Last but certainly not least: Praise God for the privilege of studying his Word with tools that apostles and prophets could not have imagined.